DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 226 CS 212 863

AUTHOR Fleckenstein, Kristie S.
TITLE Planes of Existence: Toward Epistemological Peace.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Anthropology; Cognitive Processes; *Concept Formation; *Educational Theories; *Epistemology; Higher Education; Phenomenology; *Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Theory; Consensus Models; *Philosophical Influences

ABSTRACT

In composition studies, negotiation and consensus are threatened by growing epistemological schisms that privilege one way of knowing, one kind of knowledge, even one kind of language over another. Those who assert that one epistemology is more "right" set the stage for paradigmatic conflict. Some theorists predict a dismal resolution of these so-called "paradigm wars," which could result in discredited epistemologies and methodologies being cast onto the intellectual slag heap. Nascent paradigm wars can be warded off in a variety of ways. Epistemologies can be viewed as ways of knowing that exist on separate, non-intersecting planes, rather than as forces struggling to occupy the same territory. The problem, then, is not in establishing or defending the legitimacy of any one plane but in coordinating analyses resulting from different ways of knowing. Facets of meaning-making can be reexamined and conflicting epistemologies can be transformed into complementing ways of knowing. Application of three primary ways of knowing--experimental, psychological, and anthropological--is a product of the researcher's (or learner's) purpose, intentions, and needs. All three ways of knowing indicate that meaning is multifaceted. An embrace of contraries is necessary to serve the students who enter classrooms trusting in their teachers. (SG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Kristie S. Fleckenstein
1991 CCCC

Planes of Existence: Toward Epistemological Peace

ED332226

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS212863

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Kristie Fleckenstein

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Kristie S. Fleckenstein
1991 CCCC

Planes of Existence: Toward Epistemological Peace

Almost a decade ago, Maxine Hairston claimed that composition studies were in the midst of a paradigm shift, similar to the disciplinary revolutions hypothesized by Thomas Kuhn. While few dispute the existence of change and growth within our discipline, many deny that our field constitutes a paradigm, claiming, instead, that our strength lies in our diversity, not in our allegience to a single intellectual orientation. We are a consensual discipline, Tim Crusius asserts, one which accommodates, not dismisses, opposites. The phenomenon we are committed to studying--that of meaning-making in its many transformations--is so complex that it requires examination from many vantage points, not the single one dictated by a paradigm. Thus, the success of our joint endeavors requires that we dialectically "embrace contraries," to use Peter Elbow's words. Our existence rests within that embrace.

Recently, however, negotiation and consensus are threatened by growing epistemological schisms that privilege one way of knowing, one kind of knowledge, even one kind of language over another. For instance, James Berlin divides composition studies into three epistemological camps--positivistic, subjectivist, and interactional. Each epistemology fosters a particular kind of rhetoric--and, by extension, a particular kind of language, thinking, and knowledge. Such a division in itself is not dangerous. However, Berlin then privileges one rhetoric--the social epistemic--and thus one epistemology--above the others, claiming that all but social epistemic rhetoric pander to the dominant socio-politico-economic power structure. Such a stance thus implies that one way of knowing is more "right," is more valuable than another, and sets the stage for paradigmatic conflict. N. L. Gage has labeled such conflicts "paradigm wars." Gage predicts a dismal resolution to these wars, one in which discredited epistemologies and methodologies are cast on to an intellectual slag heap. Russell Durst foresees a similar gloomy future, where we "find ourselves engaged in bitter debates in which one or both sides refuse even to acknowledge the legitimacy of the other's research agenda, theoretical approach, or methodological framework" (405). Such a future, even the possibility of it, impoverishes our discipline. Without the invigorating struggle to construct consensus out of controversy, we limit ourselves as researchers and as teachers. If our field evolves through dialectic, than anything threatening our conversations, threatens our existence and points the way to a frightening intellectual tyranny.

So how do we ward off nascent paradigm wars? For one, we can begin to look at epistemologies not as forces struggling to

CS21286

occupy the same territory, but as ways of knowing that exist on separate, non-intersecting planes. Thus, research on one plane may complement research on another, but the studies are neither cumulative nor conflicting. They are different vantage points from which to examine a complex phenomenon. Such is Paul Cobb's suggestion in his attempt to heal schisms in math education similar to those threatening composition studies. Drawing on the work of Jerome Bruner and Nelson Goodman, Cobb visualizes epistemologies and methodologies as differing ways of knowing that we all use as researchers and as learners. These contrary ways of knowing exist within non-intersecting domains of description. We shift among these planes as the situation demands. The problem, then, is not in establishing or defending the legitimacy or validity of any one plane but in coordinating analyses resulting from these different ways of knowing. It is through this coordination that we can understand how practices, activities, and interpretations that we all take for granted result in communication.

Cobb's scheme provides a powerful lens through which we can re-examine facets of meaning-making and possibly transform conflicting epistemologies into complementing ways of knowing. First, let me describe how each plane offers a unique way to view meaning-making, and second, let me show how the epistemologies defined by Berlin parallel Cobb's ways of knowing.

According to Cobb's scheme, we draw on three primary ways of constructing meaning: experiential, psychological, and anthropological. The choice of a particular context is a product of the researcher's (or learner's) purpose, intentions, and needs. The experiential context focuses on the learner's sense of meaning, both as she constructs it and as she shares it. By examining the learner's subjective sense of meaning as it is being constructed, we try to infer the world in which that meaning gains currency and credibility for the learner. We seek to understand the assumptions or the rationale, by which the learner orders her world and constructs her meaning. This context of knowing, with its subjective emphasis, forces us outside of our constructions, or at least into a consciousness of them, as we attempt to enter into the learner's universe. Such an attempt is important for, as Cobb points out, "People act toward things [including the actions of others] on the basis of the meaning these things have for them," and a experiential viewpoint offers us access to that individual meaning.

Such a perspective also parallels the subjectivist epistemology hypothesized by Berlin. Berlin describes subjectivism, out of which expressionist rhetoric evolves, as an ideology that conceives of a transcendent truth accessible only to the individual, and, thus, privileges that individual experience of truth. The experiential context, with its focus on the individual's "lived through truth," allows us to ask

questions about the world within which such a truth has currency. As researchers, then, we can formulate questions about our students' perception of their writing roles, of their writing worlds, of their writing environments. We can formulate questions about writing engagement, appropriation, and voice, all from a subjectivist perspective.

However, according to Cobb, the experiential context focuses not only on the learner's subjective experience of meaning as he constructs it, but also on his sense of objective reality as he shares and modifies that construct with community members. As a result of the sense of common meaning, the learner perceives that concept or construct as existing outside of himself, as something he has discovered, not created. The learner's experience of "taken for granted" or "taken as certain" meaning then allows him to build on that construct, to transform it into operations leading to other constructs, that, in turn, are shared, modified, and transformed into part of that learner's belief in an objective realm.

This sense of an objective, empirically verifiable reality parallels Berlin's description of a positivistic epistemology in which there is a materially real and veriable truth outside of the perceiver. Whether such an objective reality does, in fact, exist, an ontological, not an epistemological, question, is not a issue here. What is important is that the construction of such a perspective enables us to question and investigate the learner's belief in a concrete reality. We have all witnessed this certainty in our classrooms, experienced it ourselves in our own communal interaction. For instance, it manifests itself in the "ah-ha" sensation many readers have after struggling with a difficult passage. Suddenly, the recalcitrant text seems to yield its meaning, and the reader thinks, "Oh, so this is what the author means. Of course, it right there. Why didn't I see it before." In writing, such a perspective allows us to ask why as writers we can insist that we know what we want to say, but we don't know how to say it, as if the two processes were separable. A positivistic epistemology, seen as an experiential way of knowing, helps us focus on the individual learner's sense of objective meaning, of communication successfully achieved. It affords us a way to examine institutionalized meanings and the conviction that the meaning exists in the word, an erroneous conviction, perhaps, but a conviction that facilitates communication in daily interactions.

The second way of knowing, the psychological context, also focuses on the individual, but its concern is with the processes through which learners' construct their realities. The purpose is to explain how those realities gain credence for the learner. According to Nelson Goodman, the psychological context addresses those "hard but inevitable questions about the mental operations required to construct a world like that of modern physics or of

every day life" (qtd. in Cobb 6).

Attention is centered on the interaction between the learner and the object, whether it is an infant with a cup, a kindergartener with the number "2," or a college student with a text. The pschological way of knowing provides a vantage point from which we can examine meaning as a private process in which we reflect on our interactions with something and abstract some sense from those interactions. It attempts to hypothesize the mental operations facilitating reflective abstraction and guiding the ensuing social interactions that result in a sense of shared meaning.

As Cobb explains, such a context is predicated on the dual planes of individual and cultural development Vygotsky hypothesizes: the interpsychological, which occurs between people, and the intrapsychological, which occurs within the learner. Internalization, the term Vygotsky uses to refer to the process of transforming social phenomena into psychological phenomena, consists of no isomorphic match between interpsychological and intrapsychological structures. Instead, internalization transforms social processes, changing structures and functions. It is this process of internalization, the constructive act itself, on which the researchers within the psychological context focus.

This psychological way of knowing suggests a value for the cognitive rhetoric which Berlin initially classifies as evolving from an interactional epistemological but more recently casts into the positivitic camp. For instance, the cognitive perspective allows us access to questions concerning the processes by which students ascribe meaning to an activity and create their realities. Such a viewpoint is necessary, for if no process of reflective abstraction, no process of transformation or internalization, is hypothesized, then learners are reduced to culturally determined and culturally driven entities in which social patterns are directly imprinted on a malleable form. This is double dangerous in that the concept of a culture or a social pattern is a theoretical construct of the researcher, not a reality outside the scholar's activities. Thus, the psychological way of knowing enables us to question how students experience certain roles as writers or enter particular worlds of writing. This context allows us to consider how students endow language activities with certain value or construct a certain meaning out of text. Finally, the pscyhological domain allows to see meaning as constructive, both individually and socially.

Finally, the anthroplogical context, which conceives of meaning as socially, as well as individually, constructed, offers us the opportunity to view meaning as a social concept. From the anthropological perspective, reality or truth is the result of interpersonal negotiation, not just individual cogitation. The

focus of anthropological research is the learner's interactions within an environment and on the meaning which emerges from those interactions. Emergent meaning, the term Cobb uses to refer to negotiated meaning, is the meaning that parent and child come to share and the meaning that makes possible the smooth coordination of activity. Finally, this emergent meaning is that which gives rise to an individual's sense of objective reality. Thus, researchers working within an anthropological context examine compatible meanings that are negotiated between individuals. These are the meanings that fit, rather than match exactly. The anthropological vantage point forces us to gaze at the "contact zones," the areas in which individuals with subjective meanings negotiate their way to shared meanings, changing, in the processes, those subjective meanings.

This last way of knowing parallels what Berlin defines as the interactional epistemology, and, as with the other contexts, it offers insights hidden by the previously domains. According to Berlin, an interactional epistemology views truth as arising out of the interaction of the elements of the rhetorical situation. Truth has no ontological reality outside of that interaction. Such a perspective allows us to focus on the role of communal and social processes in developing meaning, and these processes of negotiation are evinced as people resolve "semiotic challenges that occur as they attempt to fit their activity to that of others and thus contribute to a consensual domain for joint activity" (Cobb 27). Through this perspective we can examine a writer's emergent meaning as he or she works back and forth between peer as reader, teacher as reader, and self as reader. We can also ask questions about assumptions the group takes for granted and on which it builds its activities. We can ask questions about the kinds of negotiation take place as an individual attempts to enter a previously unknown community. What changes occur within the individual and the community? We can examine how social and rhetorical patterns come to be by means of particular interactions. What practices and meanings are shared that allow for the smooth functioning of group activities?

As these three ways of knowing indicate, meaning is multifaceted. To call meaning something we experience is to tell only part of the story. To call it a constructive product of psychological processes is again only part of the story. To call it an communal process with only temporary points of stasis is finally but part of the story. Meaning is all this, and very probably more. Viewing epistemologies as possibilities, as differing lenses through which we can alter our narrow vision, can only enrich our field. Such a view does not synthesize away differences. In fact, if, as Marilyn Cooper claims, the differences engendered by dualism are valuable, then the invigorating exchange engendered by pluralism can be even more valuable. After all, an epistemology is itself but a

construction; it is "true" only in so far as it helps us create a satisfactory reality. When it ceases to do so, nothing should prevent us from entering other "possible worlds," ones that better serve our needs.

One final point. As researchers and as teachers, we are engaged in no game. The crucial issues here are not the race for tenure, for the prestige of studies published, of grants obtained, of merit raises allocated. The cruical issues lie with our students. Thus, we need to resist a tendency to intellectual oneupsmanship, to oppositional thinking. We need to acknowledge the necessity for interdisciplinary, multiperspective inquiry. We need to acknowledge that the research community we enter does not represent the only perspective, nor does it always represent the most valuable one. To serve the people who enter our classrooms trusting us, a single perspective is not enough. An embrace of contraries is necessary.

Works Cited

Berlin, James. "Rhetoric and Ideology." College English 50 (Sept. 1988): 477-95).

---. Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1987.

Bruner, Jerome. Actual Minds, Possible Worlds. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986.

Cobb, Paul. "Multiple Perspectives." Transforming Children's Mathematics Ecuation: An International Perspective. Eds. L. P. Steffe and T. Wood. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1990. 200-215.

Cooper, Marilyn. "Dueling with Dualism: A Response to Interviews with Mary Field Belenky and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak." JAC 11.1 (Winter 1991): 179-185.

Crusius, Timothy W. Discourse: A Critique and Synthesis of Major Theories. New York: MLA, 1989.

Durst, Russell K. "The Mongoose and the Rat in Composition Research: Insights from the RTE Annotated Bibliography." CCC 41 (Dec. 1990): 393-408.

Elbow, Peter. Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.

Gage, N. L. "The Paradigm Wars and Their Aftermath: A 'Historical' Sketch of Research on Teaching Since 1989." Educational Researcher 18 (Oct. 1989): 4-10.

Hairston, Maxine. "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing." CCC 33 (1982): 275-86.